

A Force for Good



Humanitarian Aid for War-Torn Somalia

*Story by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class John Osborne
CJTF-HOA Public Affairs*

DJIBOUTI, Africa – The Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa coordinated with the American charity Islamic Relief USA on the donation of \$463,000 worth of food and medical supplies to the war-torn country of Somalia. The medicines and food were given to the Ugandan People’s Defense Forces, who delivered them to Mogadishu on Aug. 9.



Army Maj. Lisa Dewitt instructs students during medical military-to-military training in Uganda. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class John Osborne)

“Supporting the African Union peacekeepers like this is very satisfying from a physician’s point of view,” said Commander David Burch, former command surgeon for the task force, who was instrumental in setting up the project. “We were able to support our medical counterparts in the Ugandan army, and by doing so, make a positive impact for the citizens of Mogadishu who are caught up in the fighting there.”

In keeping with the task force’s mission, which is to conduct unified action in the Horn of Africa to prevent conflict, promote regional stability, and protect coalition interests in order to prevail against extremism, the U.S. has been providing food aid to Somalia since the Ugandan forces deployed there in April. But this bulk delivery of food and medical supplies was special because it marked the first time the non-governmental

organization Islamic Relief USA had worked with CJTF-HOA. The undertaking required massive coordination and collaboration within the support system of the Department of Defense, the Ugandan army, and U.S. ambassadors from the Ugandan and Kenyan embassies.

“We were alerted to the potential for providing assistance by a discussion between Doctors Without Borders and the U.S. special envoy to Somalia,” Burch said. The task force “maintains close contact with the embassies in our area of responsibility, so the ambassador was able to relay this information to us. Through a source in DoD, we made contact with an Islamic non-governmental organization, and I personally met with doctors in the Ugandan military, including the physician directly in charge of the contingent in Mogadishu, to make sure we understood exactly what their needs were.”

Once those needs were determined, the decision was made to have the Ugandan military deliver the aid to Mogadishu. It is one of the only forces that has deployed to Somalia to conduct peace-keeping operations since fighting began earlier this year as a result of Ethiopian troops ejecting the Islamic courts from the capital city. There were two reasons to use a military element for the delivery of humanitarian aid: The Ugandan

army operates a field hospital that provides immediate medical assistance to the people of Mogadishu, and the security situation there makes it difficult for NGOs to operate safely.

It was a tasking that was readily and proudly taken on by the Ugandans, many of whom have been trained by the task force soldiers from the Fort Meyer, Virginia-based 3rd Infantry, Old Guard. “This is a sign that our efforts as a country are appreciated,” said Public Affairs Officer and Spokesman Major Felix Kulayigye of the Ugandan Army, after witnessing the loading. “We are also grateful to the U.S. government who delivered the supplies here. This goes a long way in addressing the needs of the people in Mogadishu.”

Kulayigye’s feelings are shared by Commander Joel Larcombe, who took over for Commander Burch and saw the project to completion. Larcombe traveled to Uganda to conduct training with Ugandan medical personnel, some of whom have been involved in the next deployment of peacekeepers and would then be able to assume the role of trainer themselves. The training also offered Larcombe the opportunity to incorporate the medications the medics would be receiving and develop treatment plans for the diseases they would likely see while deployed to Somalia.

“I think it was a great thing to see an Islamic NGO donate pharmaceutical supplies to Ugandan peacekeepers to treat Somali victims,” Larcombe said. “When I arrived in Uganda, I had a candid conversation with the prospective deploying unit commander about the lack of medical care available in Somalia. He informed me that the Ugandan medical personnel spent most of their time and supplies caring for Somalis, so we were happy to do everything we could. It was a true team effort.”